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ABSTRACT

The skills, understandings, and special attributes that a competent college student should acquire are described. General skills in writing, reading, speaking, and calculating are primarily the responsibility of elementary and secondary education, and these skills must be mastered by every college student. In addition to a specification of these general skills, a listing is provided of the basic understandings of the following concepts that are needed for intelligent adult behavior: democracy and citizenship, history and geography, science, economics, literature, and self-directed learning. Special attributes that a college graduate should develop are: the ability to reason or think critically; acquaintance with the major methods of inquiry; perspectives of some of the important scholarly, literary, and artistic achievements of the past; a knowledge of our form of government; a moral sensibility for both personal and institutional behaviors that affect the human values of mutual respect, cooperation, and integrity; and a heightened sense of personal awareness both of oneself and one's place in society. (SW)

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THE COMPETENT COLLEGE STUDENT

AN ESSAY ON THE OBJECTIVES AND QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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TENNESSEE Higher Education Commission

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April, 1977

A discussion paper sponsored by the
Tennessee Higher Education Commission
and funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

FOREWORD

Upon an invitation from the staff of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, a group of distinguished Tennessee educators wrote a brief essay to stimulate dialogue on the basic goals and expectations of higher education. The group was asked to state a position on the minimal attainments which are generally expected of college students. It was not asked to formulate a Commission policy statement or to reflect consensus of the higher education community. However, it was recognized that the statement may affect educational policy by way of reaction. Representing many years of service to Tennessee higher education, the authors are:

Dr. Harvie Branscomb, Chancellor Emeritus, Vanderbilt University;

Dr. Ohmer Milton, Director, Learning Research Center, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville;

Dr. John Richardson, Graduate Dean Emeritus, Memphis State University; and

Dr. Herman Spivey, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Emeritus, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

These educators have spoken from their wisdom and their years of experience concerning (1) minimal achievements which should be expected of college students and (2) ideal outcomes students might derive from a college education. Toward these ends they have succeeded admirably, and the Commission expresses sincere gratitude for their contributions toward defining additional quality in Tennessee higher education.

Wayne Brown
Executive Director
Tennessee Higher Education Commission

INTRODUCTION

"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate
to the stormy present. . . .
As our case is new, we must think anew, act anew.
We must disenthrall ourselves. . . .

—Abraham Lincoln—

Why have we written this pamphlet? It is because we sense a widespread feeling that college programs of general education—or liberal education, if you prefer—are in need of discriminating review. We sense this in the criticisms that much of undergraduate education is uncertain of its aims and that too many college graduates are unable to perform competently as individuals or as responsible citizens in the society in which they must live.

Education is America's greatest investment. It is the largest item of governmental expenditure, national defense excepted, and faith in its value together with belief in the equal value of all human beings constitute the twin pillars of the distinctive American spirit.

Yet with all of this national commitment to education, it has become increasingly apparent that too many young people are entering the stream of adult life without having acquired some of the skills and understandings essential for their own effectiveness and for useful citizenship. Illustrations of individuals who have had the advantages of college experience, yet who are unable to understand the structures and demands of everyday living, who cannot communicate effectively, or deal adequately with ordinary financial situations, come too frequently to light. Some of the difficulty may lie in the magnitude of the American educational undertaking. Educators are pressured to deal not only with a vast array of subjects but to manage education as a means of solving basic social problems. The difficulties have been compounded by the general drift in recent years toward vagueness of purpose, laxity of standards, and relativity of values in high schools and colleges.

This essay addresses itself to this large issue. It points out certain basic and assessable skills and understandings that we deem indispensable, regardless of one's vocation. Furthermore, we believe educational institutions must recognize this fact and assure both themselves and their supporting constituencies that these proficiencies are acquired by students. We have identified in the first two sections of this paper some of those competencies which seem to us to call for this primary concern though we would not claim finality or completeness for our list. Some of them are clearly the responsibility of secondary schools, but not all high schools are equal in resources or accomplishment. In accepting students with basic deficiencies, colleges may assume that such deficiencies will be corrected by these students during their years of further study. It is our conviction that Tennessee colleges should assure themselves that these deficiencies are corrected.

Higher education, of course, is not concerned merely with basic skills. The important years which students commit to institutions of higher education should result in such understandings of human relationships and values so as to give meaning, direction, and significance to their lives. These are lasting values of higher education and reasons for its continued support. In the third section of this paper we have endeavored to reaffirm these larger values which the colleges contribute.

We have no illusion about our statement concerning minimal essential or larger goals being complete or final. In fact, we are keenly aware of our own limited insights set against the vastness and complexity of modern knowledge. And experience has taught us that diversity within American higher education is to be valued. Institutions differ in their mission, circumstances, and experience, and no doubt will differ in their priorities. By stating our views on essential and fundamental objectives, we hope colleges and universities will be stimulated to examine and assert their goals as specifically as possible. We and the Commission staff are particularly interested in other statements of general student achievement goals. Out of this discussion we hope that educational service both to students and to society will be improved.

Dr. Harvie Branscomb
Dr. Ohmer Milton
Dr. John Richardson
Dr. Herman Spivey

Section I

INDISPENSABLE SKILLS

SECTION I IS ESSENTIALLY A LIST OF SKILLS WE BELIEVE A COLLEGE GRADUATE OUGHT TO HAVE MASTERED AT SOME POINT. THE GENERAL SKILLS OF WRITING, READING, SPEAKING, AND CALCULATING ARE PRIMARILY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION. MASTERY OF THESE SKILLS IS ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE FUNCTIONING IN ADULT LIFE AS WELL AS INDISPENSABLE PREREQUISITES FOR GAINING A COLLEGE EDUCATION. THEREFORE, THESE SKILLS MUST BE MASTERED BY EVERY COLLEGE STUDENT.

WRITING

"If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity."
NEWSWEEK, December 8, 1975, p. 58 .

What level of skill in writing should we make sure every college graduate achieves? Before graduation from college an individual should have the ability to write sequential statements in which the central idea or impression is clear; the sentences are related to one another; the supporting details or examples are relevant and sufficient; the organization is logical or effective; the words are appropriate; and the spelling, capitalization, and punctuation are in accord with good usage and appropriate to the topic and tone of the essay or report. The level of writing competency which might reasonably be expected of all students is that required for such as the following:

1. Letters of application and biographical resumes.
2. Reports related to one's work, etc.
3. Letters to editors or to political representatives.
4. Customer complaints.

READING

"Reading is Fundamental."
UNITED STATES HOUSE BILL 9048.

Each student should possess skills needed to read materials intended for general circulation. Reading well includes the ability to alter speed according to the type of material and purpose for reading, the ability to survey and skim materials to discern the overall messages and to gain personal impressions. In any case, reading is comprehending what is read well enough to restate the central theme and distinguish it from the supporting details. One should be able to read materials such as the following:

1. Articles in local newspapers, *Reader's Digest*, news periodicals, etc.
2. Materials in one's field of interest, both technical and popular.
3. Directions on government and other forms.
4. Contracts and insurance policies, payment plans and other financial agreements.
5. Imaginative literature.

SPEAKING

Speaking well is "the power to translate a truth into language perfectly intelligible to the person to whom you speak."

—Emerson—

Every student should have the ability to speak in acceptable English, with unity of thought, and logical arrangement of ideas. He or she needs the ability to explain, narrate, describe, and persuade, choosing language and tone appropriate to the purpose of the talk and the nature of the audience addressed, and demonstrating an awareness of how voice and body affect oral communication. Such speaking ability would be that required in such instances as the following:

1. Stating one's vocational goals, experiences, and training in an interview for a job.
2. Recounting the main ideas of a lecture or discussion.
3. Requesting or giving information directly and concisely.
4. Describing concisely and clearly a witnessed event, such as an accident.
5. Making informative and appropriate presentations to groups.

MATHEMATICAL SKILLS

"Mathematics is said to have, for example, disciplinary value in habituating the pupil to accuracy of statement and closeness of reasoning; it has utilitarian value in giving command of the arts of calculation involved in trade and the arts; culture value in its enlargement of the imagination in dealing with the most general relations of things; even religious value in its concept of the infinite and allied ideas."

—John Dewey—

The student should have the ability to make everyday calculations. The ability to use whole numbers, fractions, percents, and decimals in the basic operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, is essential. All students at the college level should be capable of performing procedures such as the following:

1. Calculation of simple and compound interest.
2. Use of elementary statistical data.
3. Translation of measures to and from the English and metric systems.
4. Construction of simple graphs and charts.
5. Use of simple algebraic formulae.

Section II

BASIC UNDERSTANDINGS

BESIDES SUCH SPECIFIC SKILLS, BASIC UNDERSTANDINGS ARE NECESSARY FOR INTELLIGENT ADULT BEHAVIOR, NO MATTER WHAT ONE'S VOCATION. IN OUR JUDGMENT THE CONCEPT OF GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIRES COMPETENCE IN A NUMBER OF FIELDS TOO FREQUENTLY REGARDED AS MERELY OPTIONAL. WHILE INSTITUTIONS MAY VARY IN LEVEL OF EXPECTATION IN THESE REGARDS, WE BELIEVE A GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPTS SUGGESTED UNDER DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP, HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY, SCIENCE, ECONOMICS, LITERATURE, AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IS A MUST FOR ALL COLLEGE GRADUATES. THE FOLLOWING LISTS ARE NECESSARILY LIMITED AND ONLY EXAMPLES.

DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP

"I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

— Thomas Jefferson—

The individual should know the nature and tenets of American government as a basis for effective citizenship. Indispensable also is the understanding of cultural differences and world relationships. Examples of basic knowledge needed are:

1. General functions of, and distinctions among, the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of local, state, and national government.
2. The recognized responsibilities and rights of citizens under the Constitution.
3. The various means of citizen involvement in the processes of government.
4. The growing interdependence of nations, especially regarding natural resources and economic development.

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

"History, by apprising (men) of the past, will enable them to judge the future."

—Thomas Jefferson—

The student should have an awareness of self in time and place. Such understanding would include a basic acquaintance with the past and present social and physical conditions of mankind and the natural world. Awareness of one's place within history requires understandings such as the following:

1. Knowledge of the major forces and events which have formed American society.
2. Knowledge of the diversity of world cultures.
3. Knowledge of the influence of cultures that compose American population; e.g., their values, life styles, and circumstances.
4. Knowledge of geographic differences and awareness of their impacts on the lives of individuals, societies, and nations.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

"There is no more threatening and no more degrading doctrine than the fancy that somehow we may shelve the responsibility for making the decisions of our society by passing it to a few scientists armored with a special magic."

—J. Bronowski—

Individuals who spend their lives in a technological society should have a knowledge of basic scientific principles and technological applications. Scientific understandings expected of a college student might include:

1. An understanding of scientific method and the procedures and limitations of scientific proof.
2. Understanding some of the basic natural laws which affect everyday life, such as gravitation, genetics, and transformation of energy.
3. Understanding that theories evolve and that scientific knowledge is frequently advanced and refined.
4. Knowledge of the development and the importance of accurate measurement and observation for scientific conclusions.
5. Knowledge of the relationship between inquiry for general advancement of knowledge and applications of that knowledge to technical development.
6. An awareness of the growing role of such technological instruments and processes as computers, electronic communications, X-ray techniques, and isotopes.

ECONOMICS

"We do live in an age in which the importance of economic policy bulks very large, and there is no doubt that we must rely on the informed opinion of our citizenry to distinguish between those policies that will cause the nation to prosper and those that will cause it to decline."

—Robert L. Heilbroner—

The student should possess an understanding of the fundamental concepts of economics essential to both personal and civic effectiveness. In order to make intelligent decisions for one's own self-interest and for one's social and political obligations, the student needs knowledge of the following aspects of economics:

1. The functions and consequences of personal, corporate, and governmental credit.
2. The means and consequences of savings and investment, both personal and corporate.
3. Sources of government funds and a general knowledge of the American tax system.
4. The interrelationships of scarcity, prices, demand, distribution, competition, property, and profits.
5. The effects of different marketing techniques.

LITERATURE

"Literature is the greatest of all sources of refined pleasure, and one of the great uses of a liberal education is to enable us to enjoy that pleasure."

—Thomas Henry Huxley—

Some experience with literature, a liking for reading, and an appreciation of the value of vicarious experience as a means of enlarging one's awareness of the nature of the human condition seem to us essential for a satisfying individual life and as a means of continuing one's lifelong learning and enjoyment. The achievement of such an understanding should not be left to chance, we think, but should be a part of the conscious purpose of educational institutions.

This would be promoted by:

1. Providing opportunities in the general education segment of college life for the reading and discussion of selected literary classics from various periods and cultures.
2. Presenting literature as a form of valuable vicarious experience relevant to everyday life.
3. Focusing attention upon the fundamental problems and bewildering questions about life which the best literature presents.
4. Providing opportunities for exposure to or involvement in drama.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

"Teachers open the door. You enter by yourself."

—Chinese Proverb—

"I am still learning."

—Michaelangelo—

In a society of ceaseless and rapid change, it is essential to construe education as a continuing, self-directed, life-long process. The individual should possess an increasing ability to take responsibility for his or her own learning. Such ability is based on sensitivity to and awareness of new problems, on a confidence in one's formal education, and on a recognition of one's own talents and abilities. Examples of skills that might give evidence of self-directed learning are:

1. The ability to locate and identify sources of information; e.g., human, written, and technological.
2. The ability to question constructively the purpose for which and the way things are done.
3. The ability to improve one's writing, reading, speaking, and calculating skills.
4. The ability to distinguish between first and second-hand information and between hypotheses and verified conclusions.
5. A curiosity for exploring new areas of knowledge.

Section III

SPECIAL ATTRIBUTES

"Education is what enables every man to judge for himself what secures or endangers freedom."

—Thomas Jefferson—

The skills and understandings stated heretofore, as indispensable as they are, do not constitute the total objectives of the college experience. The ultimate objectives are certain qualities of mind and character.

The four-year college period may be viewed as a route for accelerating the development of these distinctive qualities, all the while a student may be preparing for a particular work endeavor. Simply put, they are characteristics which should help people make discerning judgments in their roles as citizens, in their personal lives, and in their careers. When these are realized, the individual and the community benefit. Fostering the development of these attributes is not the responsibility of any single academic discipline or field (e.g., chemistry, history, mathematics, engineering). The attributes we describe are fostered by the total collegiate experience.

We have tried to state these abilities in such a way as to make our intentions readily understood, and specific enough to avoid undue vagueness. During our deliberations we were often biased by our own academic specialties making us prone to view certain desirable attributes as more critical than others. Moreover, each of us tended to think of some of them in too restricted and idiosyncratic fashions; this proclivity prompted us, for the sake of clarity, to be descriptive and to elaborate in some instances and to give examples and illustrations in others. Furthermore, we are confident there are important omissions. Nevertheless, we saw our task to be to provide points from which better counterpoints will be made.

College graduates should be able to **reason** or **think critically**. Reasoning or critical thinking, as we use the term, is a combination of several talents--the utilization of them, to one degree or another, of course, varies with the problems and issues under consideration:

- —an attitude of wanting evidence to support one's own assertion as well as those of others;
- —ability to apply, at the least, elementary rules of logic;
- —skill in using informed questions to challenge the assertions of experts and authorities;
- —ability to derive properly supported conclusions from pertinent data; and
- —alertness to the tentative nature of knowledge manifested in couching assertions as probabilities.

Reasoning ability or critical thinking cannot be judged by others or be useful to them unless it is expressed clearly and effectively either orally or in writing. In fact, quality of thought is usually demonstrated through quality of expression.

College graduates should have an informed acquaintance with the **major methods of inquiry.** Prominent among these is the experimental method with its emphasis on careful observation and precise measurement. Understanding these principles will help students solve immediate problems as well as appreciate the value of the general advancement of knowledge. Included, too, are the several forms of analysis and quantitative techniques which are needed for investigating the workings and development of modern society.

College graduates should have **broadened perspectives.** That is, they should evidence some facility in viewing their own life experiences in wider contexts. We think here of their knowing some of the important scholarly, literary, and artistic achievements of the past. They should be able to distinguish some of the similarities and differences between significant current national events and those of earlier days, such as

unemployment of the 1930's and unemployment now. They should evidence some worldwide perspective and be able to evaluate contrasting social and economic systems. For example, they should be able to distinguish the problem of feeding the masses in India from that of feeding the people of Mexico.

College graduates should have a penetrating **knowledge of our form of government.** An understanding of our legal system is critical here. As a nation we chant, "Ours is a government of laws, not of people;" yet how many adult citizens know what due process is or the true meaning of the Fifth Amendment? Knowledge of our government would also be reflected in the ability to describe the major similarities and differences between it and one or more contemporary foreign ones.

College graduates, we believe, should exhibit a **moral sensibility** for both personal and institutional behaviors which enhance or erode the fundamental human values of mutual respect, cooperation, and integrity. We should aim at their acquiring judgment which would enable them to make discriminating moral choices. For example, they should manifest concern for the future through demonstrated respect for and stewardship of our finite natural resources.

Finally, college graduates should manifest a heightened sense of **personal awareness.** By this we mean knowing how to maintain a healthy mind and body, assuming responsibility for self, and contributing to one's society. Such personal awareness is based on several critical areas of knowledge, such as that needed for maintenance and preservation of a healthy body. Also basic is some understanding of how human behavior is influenced as well as the ability to recognize constructive behavior in oneself and in others. No individual's physical or psychological welfare is isolated from the welfare of one's neighbor and society. Each graduate should attain a very *personal* realization that the struggles for the freedoms enjoyed in the United States are never ending and that participation in those struggles is a moral obligation of each of us.

POSTSCRIPT

Although extensive assessments of a large higher education system may be impractical, this paper provided stimulation for a lively exchange among professional and lay educators during the first master planning forum sponsored by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. Continuing dialogue relative to the objectives of higher education in Tennessee can help promote quality in the statewide program among public and private institutions. To this end, the Commission welcomes additional comments and reflections on the theme of assuring basic educational goals and quality. Address communications to:

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